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ABSTRACT

The English language arts teacher should feel free to use mass media for pedagogical purposes, but unless he is among the few instructors who have the time, talent, or opportunity to master the visual arts, he must make clear to students that he is exploring alien territory with them. (MF)

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DOING OUR THING

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A few weeks ago a college freshman stormed into the office of the English Department chairman (me) complaining loudly that his second-semester English course had been devoted to film, not "English." He disliked movies, he said, but had been forced into studying them. He had been required to pay downtown admission to *Midnight Cowboy* and had lost working hours so he could write a review of a movie he would not otherwise have attended. Two groups of students in his section had had the money to make two amateurish little movies to please the teacher and, he said, had got good grades. The other students, like him, had had to do a paper on movie production and settle for a lousy "C" in the course — maybe worse.

"I didn't realize I could complain to the chairman of the department until some upperclassmen told me today," he added.

How I responded to this abrasive, this almost abusive, student is not my subject. Needless to say, I did not point out that neither the catalog description of the course nor the syllabus mentioned film. But I did learn something from the student's tirade and from his answers to questions after he quieted down a bit.

After instruction and with the aid of a handbook he had written a documented library research paper of considerable length; the paper had been corrected and criticized by the instructor and returned for revision; the research paper had been the central project of the course, English 102. He had likewise written a ten-page review and a number of shorter themes all graded and corrected for their "English." His final examination had been an extemporaneous essay. In short, he thought he had been studying movies but in fact he was learning writing.

Now, I knew his instructor as both a competent and a creative English teacher who happened to have special competence in film study. That instructor had made linguistics, not movies, the focal subject in English 102 the year before; for that matter she could have chosen cabbages or kings, war or peace, or *War and Peace.* I trusted the instructor, I knew that the student had learned more English than he thought he had learned — more than he might have learned with some other instructor—, and I saw the educational strategy whole and clear. I even got the student to withdraw his complaint about grading; records showed that the movie-makers did not make the "A" grades. But what a carton of worms — wriggling, half-concealed in soil, sphagnum moss, and vermiculite — that student managed to open in fifteen minutes of talk.

I will give you some undocumented, opinionated responses to the questions I saw implicit in my student-chairman interview. I will base most of my remarks on experience and conscience, not on reason.

Was the student entitled to complain to the chairman or any other person outside the classroom and outside the student-teacher relationship? Yes, although he should have gone to the instructor first. The instructor has academic freedom, but the student should have a channel of complaint if the instructor seems to step outside his competence.

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Should a student have to pay heavy, unannounced costs to get a good grade in a course such as one covertly calling for support of movie-making? Obviously not. Should he have to pay admission to an off-campus movie to get a grade in a course? No. Should he have to attend a free on-campus movie? No. An alternative, completely satisfactory for earning even the highest grades, must be available.

Are motion pictures or television the proper preserve of English teachers? No. Literature has an esthetic component, but that component does not automatically turn qualified teachers of literature into qualified teachers of motion picture appreciation nor, for that matter, of still picture appreciation. Movies and television have a word component, but that component is too small an element in the total impact to make English teachers — word teachers, that is — competent to teach movie or television criticism. The sudden blossoming and equally sudden demise of college freshman "communication" courses in the 1950's demonstrated the willingnes, but also the incompetence, of English teachers to handle instruction in motion pictures and television. "Mass media" became the subject of the moment, but only a few instructors had time, talent, or opportunity to master the subject.

(Elementary and secondary teachers of English language arts may assert that they must contend with movies and television because no one else is doing the job. I agree to the extent that the teacher is competent. As the college level, movies and television have no home to call their own — art department, speech department, or English department. A place will no doubt be found somehow, somewhere, and that place might indeed be the English department, but general competence in such case will be a far future thing.)

For me an educational — nay, an ethical — question remains, looming above the others. Do we English language arts teachers have the right to teach our students a subject not our own without admitting the subject is not our own? My answer is no. I think of the person who asked the National Council of Teachers of English to give her job insurance or legal aid so that she could safely teach her students once a week that all American forces should be immediately withdrawn from Viet Nam. I think of the girl on a plane who said to a colleague of mine last Christmastime, "I don't want my English instructor telling me about the Beatles; it's a waste of time; I know more than he does about them." Similar examples are not hard to find. The temptation to forget our real subject is dangerously great except for the true professional.

I say English-language arts teachers must profess only English. We may, we must, *use* other subjects but not *teach* them. The subterfuge of interesting the students so that they will write well must never be regarded as more than a teaching strategy. We must always confess ourselves guilty if students see through the strategy.

Yes, "movies and the graphic arts . . . haunt us, haunt word people quite a lot," as John Updike said in *The Paris Review* (Winter, 1968, p. 110). Yes, visual arts affect verbal arts, both in language and in esthetic form. Yes, we English teachers need institutes, workshops, and in-service training in visual arts. We face a new breed of students.

But let us also remember that English has historically been the dumping-ground of idealists of many doctrines who pass on to other things. I say we must stick to our thing, which is not other media except for pedagogical purposes. Our thing is the relivable experience, the recoverable idea, as set down in words. When language, literature, reading, and writing become irrelevant to life or to education, then I will start worrying about the justification for our profession.

I am not worrying.

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